



Prophethood in Translation Through an Occidental Lens: Rewriting *Seerah* as Seen in The West Across Centuries

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Abstract

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The Islamic world has long been the subject of attention for Western scholars, often perpetuating stereotypes and misconceptions about the Islamic world. However, in the contemporary era, these scholars have tended to look at various perspectives and analytical frameworks to study *Seerah*. Western scholars have devoted considerable scholarly attention to the Prophet Muhammad, examining his profound presence in historical and theological contexts. Therefore, the current study addresses a critical gap by examining the polemical theological portrayals of Prophet Muhammad in the 17th and 18th centuries as a 'false prophet, to the 19th century skepticism were Western scholars questioned the life and *Seerah* of Prophet Muhammad, which holds an enduring significance for the Muslim Ummah in the contemporary spiritual discourse. This research is established through a comprehensive historical analysis based on the shifting trends of Western scholars and their writings from the 16th century onwards. Additionally, various approaches, considering postcolonial, occidental, and theological perspectives and their methodological assumptions, were illustrated based on an extensive review of literature that indicates the Western depiction of polemical tracts and influential writing in modern scholarly works. Thus, the reliance on Western thought situates a framework for a better understanding of Western engagement with life and the *Seerah* of the Prophet Muhammad to see the occidental view of spiritual discourse in cross-cultural perception.

Keywords: cross-cultural perception, Islamic studies, Occidental lens, Prophethood, Postcolonial critique, *Seerah*

Introduction

The ambivalence, attraction, and repulsion towards Islam started back in the times of war, when people were trying to trace the history of dominant religions like Islam and Christianity. Thus, Muslim civilization became the center of learning, attractions, and culture with the rise and progress of 'Mahometanism.' Some early translations of the Qur'ān by Abbot Peter of Cluny (1092-1156) advocated the Christian views regarding Islam and Mahomet Revolution.¹ Likewise,

¹John Victor Tolan, *Faces of Muhammad: Western Perceptions of the Prophet of Islam from the Middle Ages to Today* (Princeton University Press, 2019).



many medieval French people saw Muhammad as a common noun, which is indicative of ‘idol,’² that clearly presented the Christian attitude towards Muslim civilization; however, with the rise of Islam, Christians tried to fit Muslims in the pre-established categories of their predecessors, pertaining to the schema that was not only disturbing their predefined assumptions but also questioning the prebuild constructs of religion.

Globally, religions provide a set of teachings and beliefs to be followed to achieve salvation and spiritual righteousness. However, Islam provides role models as prophets, along with teachings that allow men to follow the right path, drawing on lived experiences of prophethood.³ Muhammad, the messenger of God and Prophet of the Muslim *Ummah*, was given the order to communicate his teachings to the people of the Arab world and to others as well. Thereby, recognizing the significance of Prophet Muhammad became an obligatory action for a Muslim “first, the adherence to and the recitation of the *shahada* that there is no God but God, and Muhammad is his Messenger!.”⁴ This simple message is not only communicated through the Koran, but many hadiths supplemented the saying through valid sources and reaffirmation of the life of Muhammad as miracles and stories attributed to the people of Islam.

Western engagement with biography (*Seerah*) has evolved over the centuries. The *Seerah* of Prophet Muhammad is a foundational source for Islamic beliefs and teaching.⁵ However, early modern times of Islamic history were influenced by polemical and theological portrayals, which labelled Prophet Muhammad as an “imposter” or “false Prophet.”⁶ These perspectives were developed based on medieval Christian beliefs that solely relied on inherited narrations rather than authentic sources concerning “prophethood.” This dilemma later developed as a hypothetical reason for inquiry among 19th-century philosophers and theologians. Though they were also intrigued by 19th-century Skepticism, which later developed as a major tendency to question the existence of Muslims and Islam as a religion. In the latter half of the century, Orientalist methodology was introduced as a major framework of inquiry, particularly for the historical and philosophical perspectives of Muslim narratology. An interfaith and postcolonial perception of re-evaluations mainly led the 20th century. For centuries, this perception of Islam and the Prophet of Islam remained negative and clouded by medieval writers; however, some even tried to build a wrong association of Muhammad not as a Prophet, but as God with divine absolute powers. The change arose in 21st Century writers that not only acknowledged the sincerity of Prophet Muhammad, but they also presented a sympathetic view of the Prophet and his divine message.

The current research aims to present a historical account of *Seerah* (life of Muhammad) across centuries, spanning from the 16th century onwards. While considerable accounts have attempted to examine the phases of western engagement with *Seerah* through occidental, postcolonial, and

²Erwin I. J. Rosenthal, *Political Thought in Medieval Islam* (Cambridge University Press, 1958). <https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511735332>

³Amira Sami, H. A. Qureshi, “A Historiography of the Educational Institutes (Pre-Islamic Arab to Prophetic Era),” *Al-Wifaq* 5 (1), (2022): 71–84. <https://doi.org/10.55603/alwifaq.v5i1.e6>

⁴Victor Tolan, *Faces of Muhammad*.

⁵Al Qur’ān, al Anbiya 21:107; Al Ahzab 33:21; Muslim b Hajjaj, *Sahih Muslim*, The Book of Faith, Chapter: The obligation to love the messenger of Allah (saws) more than one’s family, son, father, and all other people; And mentions of an absolute absence of faith regarding one who does not love him with such love,” Hadīth no 44b, <https://sunnah.com/muslim:44b>

⁶John V Tolan, “European Accounts of Muhammad’s Life,” in Jonathan Brockopp, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Muhammad*, Cambridge Companions to Religion. (Cambridge University Press; 2010), 226-250.



theological lenses, there still lacks a comprehensive array of literature combining these all together to be considered in Islamic studies and bridge the gap as literature for systematic traces in Islamic studies. Previous research has tended to look at authors and specific time periods, without looking at the bigger trajectories which connect these methodological assumptions as strategic representation. Moreover, limited attention is being given to historical, philosophical, and theological approaches, such as the colonial and postcolonial context of *Seerah*, enlightenment encounters of rationalism, and reassessment of the origin of *Seerah*. The current research is built on the systematic inquiry of literature that provides a diachronic analysis from the 16th century to the present, contributing towards a comprehensive framework that highlights periodically significant writers and writings to mark the shifting trends towards *Seerah* and cultural forces, which played a developmental role in these transformations.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Defining *Seerah* and Its Significance

Seerah (the life of Muhammad) has been the point of focus and subject of writings since the Prophet passed away. The word *Seerah* in Islamic science is derived from the letter s-y-r, which means ‘route approach.’ This route covers traditions, culture, lifestyle, norms, and moral or spiritual characteristics of a person that are considered ideal to be followed by others. The Qur’ān itself defines and uses *Seerah* to identify the disciplinary characteristics and role model, which aims to examine and correlate the life of Muhammad. Previous scholars have indicated that the word *Seerah* first appeared and was used by Ibn Hisham, pertaining to the second half of the century. The stories were about wars (battles) and *Maghazi* (field of battle). Though the Qur’ān, in its major verses, mentioned obedience to God and His Prophet, as well as His duty to preach the message of God to His creation, encompassing that even God places His Prophet at the forefront.⁷

As a result, many Muslim scholars tried to document the life of Muhammad, encountering new cultures and dimensions of religiosity. The prime reason was to document and convince non-Muslim believers regarding the status of Muhammad not only from an Islamic point of view, but also demonstrating a vivid comparison between previous Prophets as well. Specific works have been devoted to particular aspects of the life and personality of Muhammad in various writings of Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (1981),⁸ Shams al-Din Shami (1993),⁹ and al-Zurqani (1996).¹⁰ Considering the context of *Seerah* in Islamic history, it is important to highlight that although *Seerah* emerged and was founded by the same scholars who documented hadith, it worked differently in the early *hijra* of the Islamic periodic timeline. It had its own methodology and criteria that relied on a set of hadith narrations because the sole purpose was to document the life of Prophet Muhammad. Previous reports on *Seerah* have evolved subsequently, but the major

⁷Suleyman Sertkaya, “A Critical and Historical Overview of the Sīrah Genre from the Classical to the Modern Period,” *Religions* 13 (3), (2022): 196. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13030196>

⁸Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, *Zad al-Maad fi Hady al-Khayr al-'Ibad* (Beirut: Muassasa al-Risala, 1981).

⁹Shams al-Din Shami, *Subul al-Huda wa al-Rashad fi Sirat Khayr al-'Ibad* Edited by Âdil Muhammad (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiyya, 1993).

¹⁰Muhammad ibn Abd al-Baqi al-Zurqani, *Sharh ala al-Mawahib al-Ladunniyya*, Edited by Muhammad Abd al-Aziz Khalidi (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiyyah, 1996).



change came in the 19th century, which tends to shift the religious lens towards Western scholarship on *Seerah* studies. These studies were mainly conducted by Orientalist thinkers.¹¹

3. Why Western Approaches Towards *Seerah* Matter?

The candle of Islam has been facing the heavy storm since its inception.¹² In his book *The Sum of All Heresies: The Image of Islam in Western Thought*, the author discusses the history of Muslim-Christian relations from a Western perspective. Such an inquiry deals with Islam as a growing political, cultural, and social reality. Islam as a religion in recent times has been considered ‘an evil religion’. The clash of civilizations contested from a Western Occidental lens by Edward Said in his book *Orientalism* (1978), clearly depicted, “a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient. Without examining Orientalism as a discourse, one cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage—even produce—the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period¹³ clearly defined that for centuries Muhammad has been the center of European discourse concerning Islam. Some polemical images provided a dominant European discourse spanning from the 17th century; however, the 19th and 20th centuries mainly dealt with the image of Muhammad as a false prophet or an imposter to justify European colonialism. This mainly occurred in Muslim lands to mark the works of Christian missionaries. Many research scholars of the 18th century tend to present the Prophet’s image from a neutral perspective, claiming that Muhammad was either a religious reformer or legislator whose agenda was to pass the words of God.

4. Theoretical Frameworks:

Theological, Occidental, and Orientalist Perspectives towards *Seerah*

Analyzing the Western *Seerah* requires a detailed understanding of theological, occidental, and orientalist methodological approaches covering the Prophet’s life. In this, the theological approach is to cover the writings penned down by the author’s own religious commitments, often developed out of the author’s Christian doctrines and belief system. To date, many accounts of Prophet Muhammad are from a theological perspective; mainly, to defend or reinterpret Christian dogmas and theological vision. Orientalist scholarship came as a vision by Edward Said to study the academic connection of Islam and Islamic concepts in the Western view and colonial mindset.¹⁴

4.1. Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries: Early Modern Religious Polemics

The early modern period of the 16th and 17th centuries was marked by religious polemics that significantly shaped Western perceptions regarding Islam and the Prophet Muhammad. These periods saw the emergence of various thinkers and religious works, which tend to address the

¹¹Suleyman Sertkaya, “A Critical and Historical Overview of the Sirah Genre from the Classical to the Modern Period.”

¹²Frederic Quinn, *The Sum of all Heresies: The Image of Islam in Western Thought* (Oxford University. Press, 2008).

¹³Roger J. Bresnahan, W. I. Cohen, State, *Reflections on Orientalism: Edward Said* (Asian Studies Center, Michigan State University, 1983); M. Reeves, P. J. Stewart, *Muhammad in Europe* (New York University Press, 2003).

¹⁴Sadia Hameed, “Paranoia of Islam in Literary Orientalism,” *Traversing Tradition, Society and Culture*, December 28, 2020, <https://traversingtradition.com/2020/12/28/paranoia-of-islam-in-literary-orientalism/#:~:text=In%20his%20work%2C%20The%20True,mask%20his%20fits%20of%20epilepsy>



intersections of faith and politics, but mainly deal with Muhammad as an imposter.¹⁵ This reformation led to intra-Christian and inter-religious polemical discourse; particularly how medieval writers dealt with Islam and Islamic texts.¹⁶

4.1.1. Martin Luther and Early Protestant Views of “Prophet Muhammad”

Early Reformation and protestant scholarship contain only fragmentary evidence of Prophet Muhammad ; however, contemporary analysis marked that Martin Luther (1483-1546) himself never directly addressed the Prophet, but his sermons, speeches, and mainly polemics towards the Catholic Church paved the way for broader theological critique of Islamic views, which were largely considered as “other.”¹⁷ The Ottoman Empire had its first interaction with Islam when the Muslim Turkish Army conquered the infidel lands for Islam. In response, many, including Martin Luther wrote “Since now we have the Turk and his religion at our very doorstep, we should warn our people, either moved by the splendor of the Turkish religion and external appearance of their religion, customs, or displeased by the meagre display of our own faith or the deformity of our customs, they deny their Christ and follow Muhammad.”¹⁸ He impulsively added “If it should come to the point of argument, I believe that the whole papistry with all its trappings would fall. Nor would we be able to defend their faith, and at the same time refute the religion of Muhammad.”¹⁹

R.W Southern, in his major writings, pointed out the existence of Islam, which was historically and geographically perceived as an alien and vicious civilization.²⁰ Though ideologically, missionaries attacked the Qur’ān in order to undermine the Islamic doctrines, however, theologians, with their long-held assumptions regarding civilizations and religion, interpreted the phenomenal growth of Muslims, aligning it with their biblical prophecy.²¹ The openness of Lutheranism towards Islam can also be viewed through his writings in 1543, in which he wrote a book, “Introduction to a translation of the Qur’ān” in Latin.²² Luther was somehow fully aware of the status of Prophet Muhammad, “the coming of Muhammad was foretold in the

¹⁵Zahraa Rezga, “Islam and the West: A Controversial Dichotomy,” *Traduction et Langues*, 18 (2), (2019): 128–137. <https://doi.org/10.52919/translang.v18i2.430>

¹⁶Tijana Krstić, “Reading Abdallāh b. Abdallāh al-Tarjumān’s Tuhfa (1420) in the Ottoman Empire: Muslim-Christian Polemics and Intertextuality in the Age of “Confessionalization,” *Al-Qantara*, 36, (2015): 341-401. <https://doi.org/10.3989/alqantara.2015.010>, <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/faec/1e90b8e88db860658d57020a05d98d03f6eb.pdf>

¹⁷Robert Kolb, Irene Dingel, L’ubomír Batka, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther’s Theology* (Oxford University Press, 2014).

¹⁸Mehmet Karabela, *Islamic Thought Through Protestant Eyes* (Routledge, 2021).

¹⁹Adam S. Francisco, “Review of *Martin Luther and Islam. A Study in Sixteenth-Century Polemics and Apologetics, A History of Christian Muslim Relations*, Vol. 8 (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2007), xiv + 262 pp., €124.00 / US\$177.00 (ISBN 9789004160439),” *Journal of Reformed Theology* 5 (2011): 105-125.

²⁰Richard William Southern, *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 1962).

²¹Nahro Ismael Muhammad, “The Clash of Islam and Christianity in the Thought of Martin Luther in the Age (XVI),” *Zanco Journal of Humanity Sciences* 25 (4), (2021): 92-107. <https://doi.org/10.21271/zjhs.25.4.6>

²²Sara Henrich, James L. Boyce, “Martin Luther—Translations of Two Prefaces on Islam: Preface to the Libellus de ritu et moribus Turcorum (1530), and Preface to Bibliander’s Edition of the Qur’ān (1543),” *Word & World*, Volume XVI, Number 2 (Spring 1996): 250-266, https://wordandworld.luthersem.edu/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/16-2_Islam/Martin%20Luther-Translations%20of%20Two%20Prefaces%20on%20Islam.pdf; Ozcan Hidir, “The Historical Background of Lutheran Protestantism from an Islamic Perspective and Martin Luther’s View of the Qur’ān, the Prophet Muhammad and the Turks.” https://isamveri.org/pdfrg/D03752/2012_1/2012_1_HIDIRO.pdf

previous books sent down by God. Rendering the Qur'ān in German, he also added that Christ prophesied much in the Gospel concerning him [Muhammad].²³ Like Luther, John Calvin (1509-1564) considered Muhammad “as a companion of the Pope who has poisoned poor people by his false doctrines. “After witnessing Sultan Suleiman, both Luther and Calvin were of the view that Islam could influence their people; they had the fear that Islam could be influential. They also believed that Muslims were once Christians, but they were “deceived by Muhammad.”²⁴

4.2. Prophet Muhammad as a False Prophet in Theological and Philosophical Discourse

The early medieval Christians practiced character assassination in early biographies of Prophet Muhammad, because they were fearful that the preaching of Muhammad would swallow the Greek and Latin Christendom. After the Muslim conquest, many Christian biographies of Muhammad appeared; additionally, it was among the lives of Muhammad written and manipulated by Christian dhimmis, the widest range of polemics was identified as presenting Muhammad as a counter-history. Barbara Roggema applied this idea of counter-history and stated Muhammadism as a “parasitical historiography,”²⁵ pertaining to the idea that the Muhammad revolution was “to conquer the lands of milk and honey” claiming that people of Arab descent will be rewarded for putting their belief in One God.”²⁶ Notably, Christians accepted claims of Muhammad, but they lent history that required reworking of certain aspects of original narratives. In light of this, it is not surprising to see similar revelations in the Hebrew bible (*Old Testament*) and the Qur'ān, in which both clearly mentioned, “Muhammad is both messenger (or *apostle* = *rasul*) and prophet (*nabi*), which places Muhammad in the prophetic topologies known as earlier scriptures.”²⁷

Western prejudice against Prophet Muhammad can also be seen through the misrepresentation and misapprehension of his life (*Seerah*). The anti-Islamic propaganda was initiated against the *Seerah* literature, where biographies of the Prophet Muhammad were written in a worse and demeaning manner to distort the image of Muhammad. Writings like: *The Imposter of Paganism Mohammedanism* (1675), *The True Nature of Imposter Fully Displayed the life of Mahomet* (1697), Samuel Bush (*the life of Mahomet* 1821), and Charles Mills (*the history of Mohammedanism* (1820), claimed that the knowledge of Muhammad was available to Christendom right after the early expansion of Islam; however, John of Damascus used the phrase “False prophet” to highlight the early western views of Muhammad and his *Seerah*. Thus, the refutational expression towards the image of the Prophet became a universal expression to fight not only against Muhammad, but with the inner fear that made many Christians convert that year.²⁸ The anti-Islamic polemics were so consumed by the very existence of Prophet Muhammad that

²³Adam S. Francisco, “Review of *Martin Luther and Islam*.”

²⁴Jae Jerkins, “Islam in the Early Modern Protestant Imagination: Religious and Political Rhetoric of English Protestant-Ottoman Relations (1528-1588),” *Eras, Edn* 13, Issue 2, (June 2012): 1-19.

²⁵William E. Watson, “Review of Saracens: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination: Tolan, John V.: New York: Columbia University Press, 372 Pp., Publication Date: June 2002,” *History: Reviews of New Books* 31 (1), (2002): 34–35. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03612759.2002.10526332>.

²⁶K. B. Wolf, “Falsifying the Prophet: Muhammad at the Hands of His Earliest Christian Biographers in the West,” in *Character Assassination throughout the Ages*, (Springer Link, 2014), 105–120. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137344168_6

²⁷Reuven Firestone, “The Prophet Problem,” *Religions*, 15 (11), (2024):1406. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15111406>

²⁸Fahd Mohammed Taleb Al-Olaqi “Western Polemic Writings about Muhammad’s Prophethood,” *Advances in Social Sciences Research Journal* 3 (5), (2016): 138-156. <https://doi.org/10.14738/assrj.35.2001>



they didn't pay attention to his biography, which became a hypothetical reason to develop this *Seerah* as a less accounted topic in literature.

4.3. Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century: Enlightenment, Rationalism, and Reappraisal of the Image of Muhammad in an Orientalist View

Seerah of Prophet Muhammad falls mainly under Orientalist study, which evolved from a skeptical dilemma of normative to revisionism and Enlightenment of Muhammadism.²⁹ Islam has commanded European attention since the Prophet Muhammad started preaching the message of God and his will. Until then, theorists, scholars, theologians, and philosophers have produced a multiplicity of judgments on the Islamic belief system.³⁰ Thomas Walker Arnold, in his article "Reevaluation of Islam, 1864-1930," talked about the rise of the Enlightenment period, defining new historical paradigms to describe the post-Enlightenment period and Western conceptions regarding Islam and Islamic values. This period was seconded by the thinker Edward Said, and his ideas on orientalism that paved the way to study the academic style of the East. Several of his other studies, published in the *Orientalist African Studies*, pointed out the thematic pattern of Arnold's studies. He was more thematic than biographic, which is why his publications are explored in greater depth for seeking personal religious ambivalence. The early time period was focused around the 'western dominating style and having authority on the Orient', that's why when Orientalists came with a vision to civilize Muslims, their ideas of development were considered the highest form of appraisal.³¹

Islamic modernism developed as an intellectual discourse across the Muslim world as a result of the infiltration of Western ideas and Western hegemony. Early modernists like Syed Ahmad (1817-1898) Khan and Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905) are among the prominent rationalists who advocated and tried to infuse Western rationalism and modern practices of Islam. Additionally, a prolific Orientalist, A. R. Gibbs, highlighted a side of apologetics who questioned "the perfection of the Qur'ān and the Personality of Prophet Muhammad."³² In a likewise manner, Syed Ameer Ali (1849-1928), a prominent Muslim historian in British India, highlighted his view of apologia in Islam in his *The Spirit of Islam, A Critical Examination of Life and Teachings of Muhammad*, and *The Ethics of Islam*. Ameer was keen to present a favorable and keen picture of Prophet Muhammad (P.B.U.H) with modern western ideas. "He recognised all the individual virtues of a modern leader of a progressive society and attributed them to Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)."³³ His work received prominent appraisal because he presented *Seerah* of Muhammad as '*Insan e Kamil*' [The perfect Man] due to his virtue, personality, and Islamic teachings. He was of the view that "The mind of this remarkable Teacher [Muhammad] was, in its intellectualism and progressive ideals, essentially modern. Eternal 'striving' was in his teachings a necessity of human

²⁹Samia Athar, and Feroz ud din Shah Khagga. "Modern Western Critical Discourse on Seerah Sources," *Al-Idah*, 40 (1), (2021). <https://doi.org/10.37556/al-idah.040.01.0732>

³⁰K. Watt, "Thomas Walker Arnold and the Re-Evaluation of Islam, 1864-1930," *Modern Asian Studies*, 36 (1), (2002): 1-98. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0026749x02001014>

³¹John V. Tolan "The Enlightenment prophet: Muhammad in Early Modern Europe," *Journal of the British Academy*, 12 (2024): 1-23. <https://doi.org/10.5871/jba/012.a07>

³²H. A. R. Gibbs, *Modern Trends in Islam* (New York: Octagon Press, 1978), 74

³³Fazlur Rahman, "Muslim Modernism in the Indo-Pakistan Sub-Continent," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, vol. 21, No. 1/3 (1958): 86.



existence: ‘Man cannot exist without constant effort’; The effort is from me; the Fulfillment comes from God.’³⁴

Another eminent scholar wrote a valuable book on the biography of Prophet titled “Muhammad, Mercy for the World” focusing history (Tafsīr) and biography (*Seerah*) of Prophet Muhammad. In his book, he showcased the negative supremacy of Western scholars towards *Seerah*, while refuting the remarks made by Orientalists regarding the life of Prophet Muhammad. In continuation of the aforementioned chain, Syed Sulaiman Nadvi, an eminent scholar, came up with his eight prominent lectures on *Seerah* in 1992. “The focus of these lectures remained the life of Prophet Muhammad while taking an evaluation of Western scholars’ methodology and historical fallacies in addition. In the third lecture, he discussed the approach of German orientalist Dr. Springer history and evaluated the views of some other orientalist like Sir William Muir, Goldziher, the attitude of Bosworth Smith and John Davenport about the biography of the Prophet of Islam.”³⁵

4.4. Twentieth Century: Revisionism and Competing Paradigms in *Seerah* Writings

The 20th-century revitalisation in *Seerah* studies in South Asia can be considered a concerted project that aimed to revise the earlier thoughts of Orientalists and their contemplative methodologies. This was the time of restoration for Muslims, where Muslims aimed to revive their development as per the old Islamic vision and thoughts. A defining element of *Seerah* can be considered the ‘rise of lay scholars,” who intended to find, social, historical, and philosophical purpose behind Muslim experiences with Western ideologies. The control of the French, the control of the British, and the colonisation of different countries across the world have conclusively highlighted the changes and development which came after Western civilization in the field of *Seerah* studies.

Modern *Seerah* texts are profoundly impacted by formidable historical currents, which became dominant as a postcolonial ideology. Though the early twentieth century was marked by the Orientalist interpretations, the latter half of the century struggled to legitimize and apologize in *Seerah* studies. At this crucial time, the Muslim scholars of this time period were particularly responding to two different regional colonial powers by referring to the classical works of *Seerah*, which could bring objectivity to the *Seerah* narrative of colonial tenure. However, the end was marked by some significant *Seerah* text, which alleviated the prophetic time. “Another contemporary methodology in *Seerah* composing is the methodology of Western-style induction and inference. Numerous *Seerah* writers studied in the West and were raised in Western colleges, and some other people who moved on from eastern colleges yet contemplated in western styles, embraced this cutting-edge approach in *Seerah* writing, particularly the individuals who composed

³⁴Syed Ameer Ali, *The Spirit of Islam* (Karachi: Pakistan Publishing House, 1981), 81-82.

³⁵Ghulam Hussain Babar, Muhammad Ferozuddin Shah Khagga, “Attentive Muslim Reflections on Orientalists’ conception of Sīrah,” *Jihāt al-Islām* 7, No. 1 (Jul-December 2013): 7-23, https://pu.edu.pk/images/journal/jihat-ul-islam/PDF/01%20ATTENTIVE%20MUSLIM%20REFLECTIONS%20ON%20ORIENTALISTS_%20CONCEPTION%20OF%20SIRA.pdf



Seerah in English, French, and German. Their compositions are as indicated by Western norms and styles of induction.”³⁶

There have been two trends of writing in Islam, one that claimed itself as Orientalist and the other that was considered to be non-Orientalist writers. Orientalists followed the Western trend of Islam; however, the non-Orientalists followed the pre-conceived notion of ideological concepts. David Samuel Margoliouth, an Orientalist, have made a famous contribution to the field of Islamic studies. Despite the fact that he was famous in other fields too, he appeared to be more interested in Islamic doctrine and Arabic. His famous works, *Mohammad and the Rise of Islam* (1905), *Mohammadism* (1911), and *Early Development of Muhammadism* (1914) had made him a controversial writer and interpreter of his time. Although he possessed considerable knowledge of Islam, he presented a negative side of his understanding on Islamic doctrine. He used the Judeo-Christian theory to read the Qur’ān, claiming that a lot of verses in the Qur’ān are from Christian and Jewish traditions. Additionally, he applied the epileptic theory to evaluate some other orientalists, who argued that Prophet Muhammad suffered from epilepsy because he was not free from hallucinations and imaginations. Such claims of Orientalists have used cruel and brutal words to describe the personality and life of Prophet Muhammad and showed hostility to Islam.³⁷

4.5. Twenty First Century: Reassessment of Prophethood in Global Context

Despite, the limitations of the Qur’ān for reconstructing the events of Muhammad’s life, it remained the best and earliest source for understanding the historical existence of Islam, which by faith was considered the messenger of God and the Prophet. He preached the religiosity that he espoused. The limitations of the Qur’ān fall back on the hadith corpus and the *Seerah Maghazi* literature. These sources confirmed the inextricability and intertwined the story and diffuse orally transmitted learning that was complemented by the scriptures of the early body of knowledge. The strand that is most concerned here is about the sacred past of Muhammad, which put *Ilm (Knowledge)* to different stages in *Seerah* literature.³⁸ Sean W Anthony (2020), in his book, *Muhammad and the Empires of Faith: The Making of Prophet of Islam*, clearly indicated the chains of transmission in *Seerah Maghazi* literature through various letters that were written to share the corpus through stories that later developed as Hadith.

The subject of prophecy and prophetism is most popular and pronounced today, but it is also the most misunderstood and misapplied concept. Although it has been discussed explicitly, subjectively and objectively too, the ongoing discussion on prophetism draws its comparative insights from both Christian and Islamic doctrines.³⁹ In his article, pointed out that “the absence of peace has many dimensions and it changes faces with the changing societies, traditions, rituals

³⁶Tehreem Fatima, Aqsa Tasgheer, “The Rationalistic-Critical Approach of Orientalists in Seerah Writings: An Exploratory Study of Modern Trends,” *Al-Wifaq*, 5 (1), (2022): 85–97. <https://doi.org/10.55603/alwifaq.v5i1.e7>

³⁷A. M. Aliu, and Adibah Abdul Rahim, “The Misrepresented Claims Of David Samuel Margoliouth on Prophet Muhammad’s Miracles: A Critical Evaluation,” *Ulum Islamiyyah*, 24, (2018): 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.33102/uij.vol24no0.57>

³⁸S. W. Anthony, *Muhammad and the Empires of Faith: The Making of the Prophet of Islam* (University of California Press, 2020).

³⁹Victor Umaru, “Historical Overview of the Old Testament Prophecy and Prophetism: Its Application to the 21st Century Church,” *Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences* 11 (1), (2023): 65–84. <https://doi.org/10.37745/gjahss.2013/vol11n16584>; Abrar Hussain Qureshi, Hafiz Muhammad Ajmal, “Towards Establishing Global peace in the 21st Century, An Analysis of Holy Prophet’s (PBUH) preaching and Practices,” *Rahat-Ul-Qulooob* 3 (2), (2019): 13–20. [https://doi.org/10.51411/rahat.3.2\(2\).2019.224](https://doi.org/10.51411/rahat.3.2(2).2019.224)

and cultures. Based on these variations, peace disappears among societies, nations, etc. There has been a long tradition of peace through the ages. Sometimes peace is derived with the help of a sword, as in the case of the Egyptians and Greeks. Sometimes, it is achieved by providing limited autonomy to the stakeholders, as in the case of Romans, who set the seeds of civil democracy. Holy Prophet restored peace through his vicious slogans of equality and revolution, which were mainly inspired by the French Revolution. This charter resulted in the state of Medina, through the Prophet's vision that was peace, not religious orthodoxy."⁴⁰

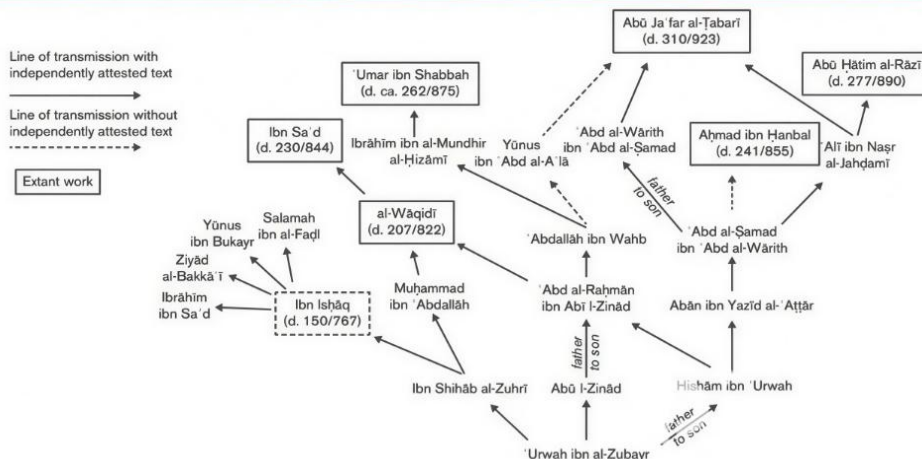


Figure 1. Transmission of *Seerah* Maghazi Literature through Letters.⁴¹

Goldziher attempted to understand hadith and the early three centuries of Islamic history and thought, which, for him, failed to adopt the sources of Islamic law. In his unparalleled study to study Islamic civilization, he took notes from canonical writers like Marshall Hodgson (1922-1968), who attempted to combine hadith to comprehend the Islamic dogma and society.⁴²

5. Various Approaches Towards the *Seerah* Studies

The recent traces of Prophetism and his *Seerah* (biographies) referred to Muhammad as the “most maligned of all the world’s great men”. Due to inevitable sources, Contemporary Islamic scholarship approaches the study of the Prophet’s *Seerah* through a variety of methodological frameworks. A central consensus continues to emphasize grounding narratives in the earliest Arabic sources—the Qur’ān, *ḥadīth*, Ibn Ishāq/Ibn Hishām, al-Wāqidi and others,⁴³ while

⁴⁰Muhammad Sajjad Malik, "Inter-Faith Dialogue; A Way to Resolve Global Peace Issues," (2023). *Central European Management Journal* 31, No. 2 (2023): 1114-11125. <https://doi.org/10.57030/23364890.cemj.31.2.113>

⁴¹S. W. Anthony, *Muhammad and the Empires of Faith: the Making of the Prophet of Islam*.

⁴²Harald Motzki, "The Collection of the Qur'an. A Reconsideration of Western Views in Light of Recent Methodological Developments," *Der Islam* 78 (1), (2001): 1–34. <https://doi.org/10.1515/islam.2001.78.1.1>

⁴³Ibn Hisham, *al-Sira al-Nabawiyya* (Cairo: Dar al-Hadith, 2006); Ibn Ishaq, *Sirat Ibn Ishaq*, Edited by Muhammad Hamidullah (Konya: al-Waqf li Khidamat al-Khayriyya, 1981); Muhammad ibn Umar Waqidi, *Kitab al-Maghazi*. (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiyah, 2004).



applying strict scrutiny to *isnād* chains and narrator reliability to filter out later interpolations.⁴⁴ Building upon this philological foundation, historians increasingly situate the Prophet's life within the geographical, socio-political, and economic settings of Mecca and Medina, thereby contextualizing events with greater historical depth.⁴⁵

Since the colonial period, figures such as Shiblī Nu'mānī (1857-1914) in South Asia have reshaped *Seerah* writing as an intellectual response to Orientalist critiques—establishing Urdu journals, convening public conferences, and presenting the Prophet both as an ethical model (*uswa-i-ḥasana*) and as proof of Islam's compatibility with modern intellectual current trends.⁴⁶ Western scholarship, by contrast, has tended to employ critical-historical approaches ranging from source criticism to literary theory and revisionist analysis, frequently questioning the reliability of traditional reports and prompting apologetic rejoinders from Muslim scholars.⁴⁷ A further development has been the integration of *Seerah* studies with *Fiqh al-Seerah*, whereby legal scholars derive binding jurisprudential principles from accounts of the Prophet's conduct and military engagements to address contemporary legal debates.⁴⁸ In parallel, proponents of analytical biography argue for balanced, critical narratives that can respond effectively to the intellectual challenges of global modernity.⁴⁹

Numerous instances can be cited to demonstrate the Orientalist tendency, particularly in earlier generations, towards the biography of Prophet Muhammad. One such example can be seen through Brockelmann's (1868-1956) views on the Jews' omission in the Medina concerning the incident between Jews and Banu Quraish. This example significantly highlights that Orientalists always relied on weak and unreliable sources for their own representation and argument development. They highlighted peculiar and unusual aspects to deliberately mislead the narratives in transmission to subject to criticism by scholars and theologians. Given this, it pertains to the view that it becomes imperative to introduce Islam, and the Islamic teachings of Prophet Muhammad to those looking for directives, truth, and guidance for the spiritual fulfilment in the Western world.⁵⁰

Several Orientalist approaches towards Islam have been made:

⁴⁴Farhat Aziz, Syeda Sadia, "Principles for the study of the biography of Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) and Orientalists Approach," *Islamic Sciences*, 03 (01), (2020). <https://doi.org/10.52337/islsci.v3i1.29>

⁴⁵Farhat Aziz, Syeda Sadia, "Principles for the study of the biography of Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) and Orientalists Approach."

⁴⁶Hafiz Muhammad Naeem, Abdul Faisal Abdul Hamid, Ahmad Yussuf, Muhammd Umair Rauf, "A Comprehensive Appraisal of the Movements aiming at Fostering Sirah Studies in British India during 1857-1947 CE," *Journal of Al-Tamaddun*, 19 (1), (2024): 297–309. <https://doi.org/10.22452/jat.vol19no1.21>

⁴⁷Samia Athar, and Feroz ud din Shah Khagga, "Modern Western Critical Discourse on Seerah Sources," *Al-Idah*, 40 (- 1). <https://doi.org/10.37556/al-idah.040.01.0732>

⁴⁸Muhammad Anees Khan, "The Importance of "Fiqh al Seerah" and the Derivation of "Fihiyyat" from the Battle of Khyber," *Journal of Religious Studies (UOCHJRS)*, 2, No. 4 (2018): 20–30. [https://doi.org/10.33195/uochjrs-v2i\(4\)1202019](https://doi.org/10.33195/uochjrs-v2i(4)1202019)

⁴⁹Farhat Aziz, Syeda Sadia, "Principles for the study of the biography of Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) and Orientalists Approach."

⁵⁰Hiba Al-Rammahi, "Glances from the Contemporary Orientalist Perspective Towards the Holy Quran and Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him and His Household) A Critical-Analytical Study," *Nabiyu-Nā*, 3 (5), (2024): 121–141. <https://doi.org/10.55568/n.v3i5.113-131.e>



1. Western Center for Islamic Studies was established following the post-colonial approach to highlight the failure of Western thinking based on secularism.
2. Secondly, executing an open criticism and the absence of biases in criticism. This was initiated by Edward Said, who demanded a revised methodology from the West to look at the East from a different viewpoint.
3. Thirdly, various textual studies were submerged with contemporary Islamic studies to study the Qur'ān, *Al-Sunnah*, and ancient scholars' legacy to understand the development of the Muslim community.
4. Lastly, the application of the new philosophy for Islamic scholarship to understand the latest methodologies towards *Seerah* literature, and development of Western approaches towards secularism, to draw a comparative analysis between previous and contemporary Orientalist thinkers and their distinctions.⁵¹

6. Conclusion

This universe has witnessed the repercussions of developments, which have transcended time to time, and have had a lasting impact on *Seerah* studies. The current article has investigated the significance of *Seerah* (Life of Muhammad), and its interrelation with internal and external bodies of literature that have evolved over the centuries. The advent of Islam was a threat to medieval writers, so they feared the rising storm of Islamic faith and misrepresented Prophet Muhammad through their demeaning thoughts and arguments, which were baseless and disrespectful towards the Islamic doctrine. Thus, Orientalism came as a time of Enlightenment, both for Christian and Muslim theologians, who were trying to figure out the actual existence and presence of the Prophet Muhammad and the divine message of God. A few Europeans have previously recognized Muhammad for the interreligious dialogues. Though many falsified the role and authenticity of Muhammad as an apostle (*rasul*) and Prophet (*nabi*). Thus, this *research* builds on a systematic review of literature starting from the early 16th century onwards, deeply exploring the theological, Occidental, and postcolonial ideas of the image of Muhammad in *Seerah* writings. However, the 21st century took a turn towards the painful reality that humanity is ever in danger of war. Though the realities have changed, but philosophical and theological message of the Holy Prophet has stood against the test of all times.

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⁵¹Mohd Farhan Abd Rahman, Nurul Hidayah Aziz, Nor Adina Abdul Kadir, and Noor Fazreen Mohd Aris, "Orientalist Studies Verge on Islam: Early History," *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 7 (12), (2018): 1246-1256. <https://doi.org/10.6007/ijarbss/v7-i12/3760>



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